March 1937

ON ‘CEREMONIAL MAGIC’

In speaking of ceremonies and in marking their essential difference from rites, we have intentionally set aside a fairly special sense, that in which it is a question of “magical ceremonies”; and although, strictly speaking, we have already explained ourselves often enough on what must be understood by the term “magic”, it will perhaps not be useless to return to it once again on this occasion, for we see it incessantly applied indiscriminately to the most diverse things, and sometimes without the slightest relation to what it really designates. Everything that seems more or less bizarre, everything that departs from the ordinary (or from what one has agreed to consider as such), is “magic” for some; and even, in vulgar language, the word has ended by scarcely having any other meaning than that. For others, “magic” takes on the appearance of something rather “literary”, somewhat in the way one also commonly speaks of the “magic of style”; and it is especially poetry (or at least a certain poetry, if not all poetry indiscriminately) to which they wish to attribute this character. In this latter case, there is perhaps a less gross confusion, but one which it is all the more important to dispel: it is true that poetry, at its origins and before it had degenerated into a simple “literature” and into the expression of a pure individual fantasy, was something altogether different, the notion of which can, in sum, be directly connected to that of mantras; there could therefore really be at that time a magical poetry, just as well as a poetry destined to produce effects of a higher order; but from the moment when, on the contrary, it is a question of profane poetry (and it is indeed this one that the moderns inevitably have in view, since, even when they happen to find themselves in the presence of the other, they do not know how to distinguish it and still believe they are dealing only with “literature”), there can no longer be any question of anything of the kind, nor either—

whatever may be said (and this is yet another abuse of language)—of "inspiration" in the true "supra-human" sense of this word. We do not contest, of course, that profane poetry, like moreover any expression whatsoever of ideas or sentiments, may produce psychological effects; but that is an entirely different question and, precisely, has absolutely nothing to do with magic; nevertheless, this point must be retained, for there may be here the source of a confusion which, in this case, would simply be correlative to another error that the moderns frequently commit as well regarding the very nature of magic itself, and to which we shall have to return later on.

That said, we shall recall that magic is properly a science; one may even say a "physical" science in the etymological sense of this word, since it is a question of laws and of the production of certain phenomena; only, it is important to specify that the forces which intervene belong to the subtle order and not to the corporeal order; and it is in this that it would be completely false to wish to assimilate this science to "physics" taken in the restricted sense in which the moderns understand it; moreover, this error is also encountered in fact, since some have believed they could relate magical phenomena to electricity or to whatever "radiations". Now, if magic has this character of science, one will perhaps ask how it can be possible that there be question of magical rites, and this must indeed be quite embarrassing for the moderns, given the idea they form of sciences; where they see rites, they think that it is necessarily a question of something altogether different, which they hasten always to identify more or less completely with religion; but let us say at once that magical rites have in reality, as to their proper end, no point in common with religious rites, nor moreover (and we would even be tempted to say all the more so) with initiatic rites, as would have it, on the other hand, the partisans of certain "pseudo-initiatic" conceptions that are current in our time; and yet, although they are entirely outside these categories, there are indeed truly magical rites.

The explanation is very simple at bottom: magic is a science, as we have just said, but a traditional science; now, in everything that presents this character, whether it be a question of sciences, arts, or crafts, there is

always—or at least as soon as it is not a question of purely theoretical studies—something which, if one understands it well, must be considered as constituting veritable rites; and there is no reason to be astonished at this, for every action accomplished according to traditional rules, of whatever domain it may pertain to, is really a ritual action, as we have already indicated in our preceding article. Naturally, these rites must, in each case, be of a special kind, their "technique" being necessarily appropriate to the particular end for which they are destined; this is why one must carefully avoid every confusion and every false assimilation such as those we have mentioned, and this as much with regard to the rites themselves as with regard to the different domains to which they respectively relate, the two things being moreover closely interdependent; and magical rites are thus nothing more than one species among many others, on the same footing as, for example, medical rites, which must also appear, in the eyes of the moderns, as something very extraordinary and even quite incomprehensible, but whose existence in traditional civilizations is no less an incontestable fact.

Now, it is appropriate to add that magic is, among traditional sciences, one of those that belong to the lowest order, for it is clearly understood that here everything must be considered as strictly hierarchized according to its nature and its proper domain; doubtless it is for this reason that it is perhaps more than any other subject to many deviations and degenerations. It sometimes happens that it takes on a development out of all proportion to its real importance, going so far as to stifle, as it were, higher and more worthy knowledges, and certain ancient civilizations died of this encroachment of magic, just as modern civilization risks dying of that of profane science, which moreover represents an even graver deviation, since magic, despite everything, is still a traditional knowledge. Sometimes also it survives, so to speak, itself, under the aspect of vestiges more or less shapeless and misunderstood, but still capable of giving some effective results, and it can then fall to the level of the lowest sorcery, which is the most common and the most widespread case, or degenerate yet in some other manner. Up to now, we have not spoken of ceremonies, but it is precisely there that we are now coming, for they constitute the proper

characteristic of one of these degenerations of magic, to the point that this one has even received from it its very designation of “ceremonial magic”.

Occultists would assuredly be little disposed to admit that this “ceremonial magic”, the only one they know and that they try to practice, is nothing but a degenerated magic, and yet it is so; and even, without wishing in any way to assimilate it to sorcery, we could say that it is still more degenerated than the latter in certain respects. Let us explain ourselves more clearly on this subject: the sorcerer accomplishes certain rites and pronounces certain formulas, generally without understanding their meaning, but contenting himself with repeating as exactly as possible what has been taught to him by those who transmitted them to him (this is a particularly important point); and these rites and these formulas, which are most often nothing but remains more or less disfigured of very ancient things, and which are certainly not accompanied by any ceremony, nevertheless have, in many cases, a certain efficacy (we have here to make no distinction between the beneficent or maleficent intentions that may preside over their use, since it is only a question of the reality of the effects obtained). On the other hand, the occultist who engages in “ceremonial magic” generally obtains no serious result, however much care he may take to conform to a multitude of minute and complicated prescriptions, which moreover he has learned only through the study of books, and not at all by the fact of any transmission whatsoever; it may happen that he sometimes deludes himself, but that is quite another matter: and one could say that there is, between the practices of the sorcerer and his own, the same difference as between a living thing, even if it were in a state of decrepitude, and a thing that is artificial.

This failure of the “magist” (since that is the word the occultists prefer to use, doubtless deeming it more honorable and less vulgar than that of “magician”) has a double reason: on the one hand, insofar as it can still be a question of rites in such a case, he simulates them rather than truly accomplishing them, since he lacks the transmission that would be necessary to “vivify” them, and to which mere intention could in no way

supply; on the other hand, these rites are literally smothered under the empty formalism of ceremonies, for, incapable of discerning the essential from the accidental (and the books to which he refers will moreover be far from helping him in this regard, since everything is ordinarily mixed there inextricably, perhaps voluntarily in certain cases and involuntarily in others), the "magist" will naturally attach himself above all to the exterior aspect which strikes him more and which is the most "impressive", and this is, in sum, what justifies the very name of "ceremonial magic". In fact, most of those who thus believe they are "doing magic" do in reality nothing more or other than purely and simply auto-suggesting themselves: what is curious here is that ceremonies manage to impose themselves not only on spectators, if there are any, but on those very ones who accomplish them, and who, when they are sincere (we have presently to concern ourselves only with these cases, and not with that in which charlatanism intervenes), are truly, in the manner of children, dupes of their own game. These therefore obtain, and can obtain, only effects of an exclusively psychological order, that is to say of the same nature as those produced by ceremonies in general, and which are moreover, at bottom, the whole reason for the existence of these latter; but even if they have remained sufficiently conscious of what takes place in them and around them to realize that everything is reduced to that, they are far from suspecting that, if it is so, it is only by reason of their incapacity and their ignorance. Then they ingeniously construct theories, in accord with the most modern conceptions, and thereby directly rejoining, whether they wish it or not, those of "official science" itself, to explain that magic and its effects pertain entirely to the psychological domain, as others do also for rites in general; the misfortune is that what they are speaking of is not magic, from the point of view of which such effects are perfectly null and nonexistent, and that, confusing rites with ceremonies, they also confuse reality with what is only a caricature or a parody of it; if the "magists" themselves are at this point, how can one be astonished that similar confusions are current among the "general public"?

These remarks will suffice, on the one hand, to relate the case of magical ceremonies to what we have previously said of ceremonies in general,

and, on the other hand, to show from where some of the principal modern errors concerning magic originate. Assuredly, “doing magic”, even in the most authentic manner possible, is not an occupation that seems to us very worthy of interest in itself; but we must nevertheless recognize that it is a science whose results, whatever one may think of their value, are just as real in their order as those of any other science, and have nothing in common with psychological illusions or reveries. One must at the very least know how to determine the true nature of each thing and situate it in the place that suits it; but it is precisely this of which most of our contemporaries show themselves completely incapable, and what we would readily call “psychologism”, that is to say this tendency to reduce everything to psychological interpretations, of which we have here a very clear example, is not, among the characteristic manifestations of their mentality, one of the least singular nor of the least significance.

REMARKS ON MATHEMATICAL NOTATION

(continued)[1]

Considering negative numbersThis stems solely, in essence, from the fact that, when a subtraction is arithmetically impossible, its result is nevertheless open to interpretation when that subtraction relates to quantities that can be measured in two opposite directions, such as distances or times. Hence the geometric representation usually given to these negative numbers: distances are counted on a straight line as positive or negative depending on whether they are traveled in one direction or the other, and a point is fixed on this line as the origin, from which distances are said to be positive on one side and negative on the other, the origin itself being assigned the coefficient zero; the coefficient of each point on the line will therefore be the number representing its distance from the origin, and its sign + or - will simply indicate which side this point is located on in relation to it; on a circumference, one can similarly distinguish a positive direction and a negative direction of rotation, which would give rise to analogous remarks. Moreover, since the line is indefinite in both directions, we are led to consider a positive indefinite and a negative indefinite, which we represent by the signs + and -, and which we commonly designate by the absurd expressions "plus infinity" and "minus infinity"; we wonder what a negative infinity could be, or what might remain if infinity were subtracted from something or nothing (since mathematicians regard zero as nothing); These are the kinds of things that, when stated in clear language, immediately reveal that they are devoid of any meaning. It must also be added that we are then led, particularly in the study of the variation of functions, to regard the negative indefinite as coinciding with the positive indefinite, such that a moving object starting from the origin and constantly moving away from it in the positive direction would return to it from the negative side, if its movement continued for an indefinite time, or vice versa, from which it follows that the straight line,

1 See the February 1937 issue.

or what is considered as such, must in reality be a closed line, although indefinite. It could also be shown that the properties of a straight line in the plane are entirely analogous to those of a great circle on the surface of a sphere, and that thus the plane and the straight line can be assimilated to a sphere and a great circle of indefinitely large radius (the ordinary circles of the plane then being the small circles of this same sphere); without dwelling on it further, we will only note that we grasp here, in a way, directly the very limits of spatial indefiniteness; how then, in all this, can we, if we want to maintain some semblance of logic still talk about infinity? Considering positive and negative numbers as we have just said, the series of numbers takes the following form:

$$-\infty \ldots -4, -3, -2, -1, 0, 1, 2, 3, 4 \ldots +\infty,$$

The order of these numbers is the same as that of the corresponding points on the line, that is, the points that have these same numbers as their respective coefficients. This series, although also indefinite in both directions, is quite different from the one we considered previously: it is symmetrical, no longer with respect to 1, but with respect to 0, which corresponds to the origin of distances; and two numbers equidistant from this central term 0 reproduce it again, but by “algebraic” addition (that is, performed taking into account their signs, which here is arithmetically a subtraction), and no longer by multiplication. One can immediately see a drawback that inevitably results from the artificial (we do not say arbitrary) nature of this notation: if one places unity at the starting point, the entire sequence of numbers follows naturally from it; but, if one places zero, it is, on the contrary, impossible to derive any number from it. The reason for this is that the constitution of the series is then based in reality on considerations of a geometric order much more than on arithmetic ones, and that, as a consequence of the difference in nature of the quantities to which these two branches of mathematics respectively refer, there can never, as we have already said, be a rigorously perfect correspondence between arithmetic and geometry. Furthermore, this new series is in no way, as the previous one was, indefinitely increasing in one direction and indefinitely decreasing in the other, or at least, if one claims to consider it as such, it is only

through a most incorrect “figure of speech”; in reality, it is indefinitely increasing in both directions equally, since what it comprises, on both sides of the central zero, the same sequence of integers; what is called the “absolute value” (yet another rather strange expression, since what is in question is never anything but essentially relative) must be considered solely from a purely quantitative standpoint, and positive or negative signs change nothing in this respect, for they express nothing other than the “positional” relations we explained earlier. The negative indefinite is therefore in no way comparable to the indefinitely small; on the contrary, it is, just like the positive indefinite, indefinitely large. The only difference is that it expands in a different direction, which is perfectly conceivable when dealing with spatial or temporal quantities, but completely meaningless for arithmetic quantities, for which such an expansion is necessarily unique, being none other than that of the sequence of integers itself. Negative numbers are by no means “less than zero” numbers, which is in fact a pure and simple impossibility, and the sign with which they are affected cannot reverse the order in which they are arranged with regard to their magnitude; moreover, to realize this as clearly as possible, it suffices to note that the point with a coefficient − 2, for example, is further from the origin than the point with a coefficient − 1, and not less far as it would necessarily be if the number − 2 were actually smaller than the number − 1; in truth, it is not the distances themselves, insofar as they are objects of measurement, that can be qualified as negative, but only the direction in which they are traversed; these are two entirely different things, and it is their confusion that is at the very source of a large part of the logical difficulties that this notation of negative numbers entails. Among the other bizarre or illogical consequences of this same notation, we will point out the consideration, introduced by t he resolution of algebraic equations, of so-called “imaginary” quantities; these are presented as roots of negative numbers, which still only corresponds to an impossibility; it is possible, however, that if they were understood in another sense, they might correspond to something real; but, in any case, their theory and its application to analytic geometry, as presented by current mathematicians, appear little more than a veritable web of confusions and even absurdities, and as the product of a need for

excessive and artificial generalizations, which does not even shy away from stating manifestly contradictory propositions; certain theorems on the "asymptotes of the circle," for example, would amply suffice to prove that we are not exaggerating anything. It may be said, it is true, that this is not geometry properly speaking, but merely algebra translated into geometric language; But what is truly serious is that, because such a translation, as well as its inverse, is possible to a certain extent, it is extended to cases where it is no longer meaningful at all. This is indeed a symptom of an extraordinary confusion of ideas, as well as the extreme culmination of a "conventionalism" that goes so far as to cause a complete loss of all sense of reality. And that's not all. Finally, we will discuss the consequences, also quite debatable, of using negative numbers from the perspective of mechanics. Mechanics, moreover, is in reality, by its very nature, a physical science, and the very act of treating it as an integral part of mathematics inevitably introduces certain distortions. Let us simply say, in this regard, that the so-called "principles" upon which modern mathematicians base this science as they conceive it (and, among the various abuses made of the word "principles," this one is not the least noteworthy) are properly nothing more than hypotheses, more or less well-founded, or, in the most favorable case, mere laws that are more or less general, perhaps more general than others, but which can at best only be applications, to a very specific domain, of true universal principles. Without going into too much detail, we will cite, as an example of the first case, the so-called "principle of inertia," which is justified by nothing, neither by experience, which shows on the contrary that there is no inertia anywhere in nature, nor by the understanding, which cannot conceive of this supposed inertia, since it can only consist in the complete absence of any property; one could, strictly speaking, apply such a word to pure potentiality, but the latter is certainly something quite different from the quantified and qualified "matter" that physicists consider.
An example of the second case is what is called the "principle of equality of action and reaction," which is so little a "principle" that it is immediately deduced from the general law of the equilibrium of natural forces: whenever this equilibrium is broken in any way, it immediately tends to re-establish itself, resulting in a reaction whose intensity is

equivalent to that of the action that provoked it; this is therefore only a simple particular case of "concordant actions and reactions," which do not concern the corporeal world alone, but rather the whole of manifestation in all its modes and in all its states; and it is precisely on this question of equilibrium that we must insist a little more. Two forces that are in equilibrium are usually represented by two opposite "vectors," that is to say, by two straight line segments of equal length, but directed in opposite directions: if two forces applied at the same point have the same intensity and the same direction, but in opposite directions, they are in equilibrium; Since they are then without action on their point of application, it is even said that they destroy themselves, without considering that if one of these forces is removed, the other acts immediately, which proves that it was not destroyed in reality at all. Forces are characterized by coefficients proportional to their respective intensities, and two forces of opposite direction are assigned coefficients of different signs, one positive and the other negative: one being f, the other will be $-f'$. In the case we have just considered, the two forces having the same intensity, the coefficients that characterize them must be equal "in absolute value", and we have: $f = f'$, from which we deduce as a condition of equilibrium: $f - f' = 0$, that is to say that the sum of the two forces, or of the two "vectors" that represent them, is zero, so that equilibrium is thus defined by zero. Since mathematicians mistakenly view zero as a kind of symbol of nothingness (as if nothingness could be symbolized by something), it seems to follow that equilibrium is a state of non-existence, which is a rather peculiar consequence. It is perhaps even for this reason that, instead of saying that two forces in equilibrium neutralize each other, which would be accurate, we say that they destroy each other, which is contrary to reality, as we have just demonstrated with a very simple observation. The true concept of equilibrium is quite different: to understand it, one need only note that all natural forces (and not just mechanical forces, which, let us reiterate, are nothing more than a very particular case) are either attractive or repulsive; the former can be considered compressive or contractive forces, the latter expansive or dilatory forces. It is easy to understand that, in a initially homogeneous medium, any compression occurring at one point will necessarily correspond at another point

to an equivalent expansion, and vice versa, so that one must always consider two centers of force correlatively, one of which cannot exist without the other; this is what can be called the law of polarity, which is applicable to all natural phenomena, because it derives from the duality of the very principles that govern all manifestation, and which, in the domain concerned by physicists, is especially evident in electrical and magnetic phenomena. If now two forces, one compressive and the other expansive, act on the same point, the condition for them to be in equilibrium or to cancel each other out, that is to say, for neither contraction nor dilation to occur at that point, is that the intensities of these two forces be, we will not say equal, since they are of different kinds, but equivalent. Forces can be characterized by coefficients proportional to the contraction or dilation they produce, such that, if we consider a compressive force and an expansive force, the first will be affected by a coefficient $n > 1$, and the second by a coefficient $n' < 1$; Each of these coefficients can be the ratio of the density that the surrounding medium assumes at the point considered, under the action of the corresponding force, to the initial density of that same medium, assumed to be homogeneous when it is not subjected to any force, by virtue of a simple application of the principle of sufficient ratio. When neither compression nor expansion occurs, this ratio is necessarily equal to one, since the density of the medium is not modified; for two forces acting at a point to be in equilibrium, their resultant must therefore have a coefficient of one. It is easy to see that the coefficient of this resultant is the product (and no longer the sum as in the “classical” conception) of the coefficients of the two forces considered; these two coefficients n and n' must therefore be two numbers inversely proportional to each other: $n' = 1 / n$ and the condition for equilibrium will be: $nn' = 1$; Thus, equilibrium will be defined not by zero, but by unity. We see that this definition of equilibrium by unity, which is the only real one, corresponds to the fact that unity occupies the middle ground in the doubly indefinite sequence of integers and their inverses, while this central place is somehow usurped by zero in the artificial sequence of positive and negative numbers. Far from being the state of non-existence, equilibrium is, on the contrary, existence considered in itself, independently of its secondary and multiple

manifestations; it is, moreover, well understood that this is not Non-Being, in the metaphysical sense of the word, for existence, even in this primordial and undifferentiated state, is still only the starting point of all differentiated manifestations, just as unity is the starting point of all the multiplicity of numbers. This unity, as we have just considered it, and in which equilibrium resides, is what the Far Eastern tradition calls the “Invariable Mean”; And, following this same tradition, this balance or harmony is, at the center of each state and each modality of being, the reflection of the “Activity of Heaven.” In concluding this study, which makes no claim to be complete, we will draw a “practical” conclusion; it shows quite explicitly why the conceptions of modern mathematicians cannot inspire us with more respect than those of the representatives of any other secular science; their opinions and views cannot therefore carry any weight in our eyes, and we have no need whatsoever to take them into account in the assessments we may have occasion to formulate on this or that theory, assessments which, in this field as in any other, can, for us, be based solely on the data of traditional knowledge.